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Mapping and evaluating the use of contextual data in undergraduate admissions in Scotland

*An Impact for Access project funded by the
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Report 1

Mapping the use of contextual indicators

Mapping the use of contextual indicators

Overview

This report summarises publicly available information about which indicators of contextual disadvantage are currently being used by 18 member institutions of Universities Scotland¹ and how they are being used to inform undergraduate admissions decisions, for example, to prioritise applicants for standard offers, or to reduce entry requirements by a set number of grades. We draw on publicly available institutional policy documents, including Outcome Agreements, admissions policies, admissions webpages and strategic plans, accessed initially in 2015 and again in 2017. The purpose of the report is to establish the range of currently publicised practices and to identify key commonalities and differences across institutions.² We do not assess in this report whether the indicators being used can be considered appropriate or robust; these considerations are touched upon in Report 2 and discussed in detail in Report 3.

Section 1 of the report outlines the major types of contextual indicator used to aid contextual offer making. We distinguish between indicators of contextual disadvantage measured at the individual-level, area-level and school-level, and identify a further set of indicators relating to the successful completion of intensive widening participation programmes, the eligibility criteria for which typically include markers of contextual disadvantage.

Section 2 details, for each of the 18 Scottish universities included in this study, which particular contextual indicators are taken into account during the admissions process according to published policy documents. We highlight which indicators are most and least commonly used; and which are emphasised by institutions as particularly important markers of contextual disadvantage.

Section 3 documents, for each university, how indicators of contextual disadvantage are being used to inform admissions decisions, based on information contained in published policy documents. We identify whether institutions are using contextual data to inform shortlisting for interview/audition, to give disadvantaged applicants additional consideration

¹ The Open University Scotland is also a member of Universities Scotland, but this institution is not included in the study given its unique open-access admissions policy.

² Contextual indicators and practices not referred to in publicly available documents fall outside the scope of this report. The results of a survey of institutions carried out by the office of the Commissioner for Widening Access provides further institution-specific information: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00521253.pdf>

for standard offers, and/or to make adjusted offers to disadvantaged applicants. Where adjusted offers are referred to, we document the terminology used to describe them, summarise what is publicly documented about the likely grade difference between adjusted and standard offers, and highlight any further conditions placed on applicants in receipt of adjusted offers.

Section 4 presents a summary of key findings and discusses their implications.

1. Broad types of contextual indicator

The contextual indicators referred to by Scottish universities in publicly available policy documents fall into four main categories: individual-level indicators, area-level indicators, school-level indicators, and indicators relating to the successful completion of outreach programmes designed to support progression to the institution where eligibility is determined partly or wholly according to contextual disadvantage criteria.

1.1 Individual-level indicators

These indicators refer specifically to the circumstances of applicants and/or their immediate households. Most of the individual-level indicators being used by Scottish universities relate to socioeconomic disadvantage, namely: having spent time in care, being a carer for a family member, being in the first generation of family members to go to university, and having refugee or asylum seeker status. However, another distinctive set of individual-level indicators refer not to socioeconomic disadvantage but to adverse personal circumstances including significant educational disruption for reasons such as serious illness, or to having a disability.

1.2 Area-level indicators

These indicators refer to the average circumstances of individuals and households living in the same locale as the applicant concerned. They can be considered to represent either proxies for the circumstances of applicants, or direct indicators of the wider environment in which an applicant lives. The area-level indicators in use by Scottish universities include: the prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage in the local area as measured by residence in an area ranked among the most deprived neighbourhoods according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD20/40); being resident in an area characterised as 'Financially

Stretched' or facing 'Urban Adversity' according to the ACORN classification (ACORN 4/5); and being resident in an area with a low young higher education participation rate (POLAR quintiles 1 and 2).

1.3 School-level indicators

These indicators refer to the average educational outcomes or circumstances of students attending the same school as the applicant concerned. As with area-level indicators, school-level indicators can be considered to represent either proxies for the circumstances of applicants, or direct indicators of the environment in which applicants have been educated. The school level indicators in use include attendance at a school with a low rate of progression to higher education including those targeted by the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP, encompassing Aspire North, LIFT Off, LEAPS, and FOCUS West) or the Access to High Demand Professions programme (ADHP, encompassing ACES and REACH), or such schools generally, and attending a school with a low average level of academic achievement.

1.4 Successful completion of an intensive widening participation programme

These indicators refer to successful completion of an intensive widening participation programme often entailing formally assessed work, the initial eligibility criteria for these programmes typically including indicators of contextual disadvantage. Successful completion of these programmes is then used as a contextual indicator for admissions purposes, on the basis that it represents alternative qualification route, a topping up of traditional qualifications for entry to degree level study, or an additional means of demonstrating preparedness for higher level academic work. These indicators include having completed the SWAP access programme delivered by colleges and targeted at mature students; or having participated in an intensive widening participation programme or a summer school delivered at the university and involving a significant time commitment and usually a series of formal assessments.

2. Contextual indicators used for admissions purposes

Table 1 lists the contextual indicators referred to by Scottish higher education institutions when describing their contextualised admissions policies. Fifteen out of eighteen institutions

make mention of at least one specific indicator of contextual disadvantage; in each case, at least one individual-level, one area-level and one school-level indicator is mentioned.

2.1 Individual-level indicators

Among the indicators measured at the individual-level, having been in care is by far the most common indicator, in use by fifteen institutions. A smaller number of institutions list being a carer for a family member (5 institutions), being the first in the family to gain a degree (2 institutions), or status as a refugee or asylum seeker (2 institutions). Having experienced significant educational disruption due to serious adverse personal circumstances is mentioned by 6 institutions, while 4 institutions mention disability as a contextual factor.

2.2 Area-level indicators

Among the indicators measured at the area-level, living in an SIMD20/40 postcode is by far the most common indicator mentioned (14 institutions). ACORN is referred to by just two institutions, and POLAR by just one HEI.

2.3 School-level indicators

At the school level, the most commonly employed indicator is attendance at a school targeted by the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP, 14 institutions), followed by attendance at a school targeted by the Access to High Demand Professions programme (ADHP, 6 institutions). Both SHEP and ADHP target schools with low average higher education progression rates. It was not always clear whether the SHEP and ADHP markers referred only to schools local to the university or whether they included schools participating in these schemes nationally. Low HE progression schools generally were mentioned by 6 institutions, and 3 institutions mentioned schools with low average levels of academic achievement.

Table 1. Contextual indicators used for admissions purposes for the general applicant

	Individual-level						Area-level			School-level				Successful completion of a widening participation programme	
HEI name	Has spent time in care	Carer for a family member	First generation in the family to gain a degree	Refugee or asylum seeker	Educational disruption e.g. due to serious illness	Disability	SIMD	ACORN	POLAR/LPN	SHEP school (Aspire North, LIFT Off, LEAPS, Focus West)	AHPD school (ACES, REACH)	Low HE progression school (general)	Low achievement school	Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP)	Intensive widening participation programme targeted at school-aged learners
Aberdeen	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓				Summer School for Access
Abertay	✓		✓		✓		✓			✓		✓			
Dundee	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	DUAL or Online Summer School
Edinburgh	✓						✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	
Edinburgh Napier	✓				✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	
Glasgow	✓						✓			✓	✓			✓	Top Up or Summer School
Glasgow Caledonian	✓	✓					✓			✓					
Glasgow School of Art	✓						✓			✓	✓				
Heriot-Watt	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓					
Highlands and Islands	Mention of contextual indicators only in relation to outreach work														
Queen Margaret	✓						✓			✓		✓		✓	Academies programme
Robert Gordon	✓						✓			✓					Access To RGU
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	Mention of contextualised admissions policy implemented in 2016/17, but details unclear														
Scotland's Rural College	Mention of contextual data in relation to Widening Participation Policy, but details unclear														
St Andrews	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Sutton Trust summer school
Stirling	✓													✓	
Strathclyde	✓						✓			✓	✓	✓			Focus West Top Up
West of Scotland	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	

2.4 Successful completion of a widening participation programme

Completion of the credit-bearing widening participation programme SWAP, aimed at mature students, was mentioned by 8 institutions. Successful completion of an intensive and usually assessed widening participation programme or summer school was mentioned by 7 institutions as leading to a contextual flag for admissions purposes. These programmes included Aberdeen's *Summer School for Access* programme, Dundee's *Dual Summer School* and *Online Summer School*, Glasgow's *Top Up* programme and *Summer School*, Queen Margaret's *Academies* programme, Robert Gordon's *Access To RGU* scheme, the *Sutton Trust Summer School* delivered at St Andrews, and the *Top Up* programme at Strathclyde University. Aberdeen's widening participation programme is targeted at individuals from low progression schools, SIMD 20/40 postcode area residents and care leavers. The widening participation programmes at Dundee don't specify indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage in their eligibility criteria but are open to those who have underperformed in education to date. Those offered by Glasgow and Queen Margaret are targeted at specific low progression schools, and/or at pupils living in SIMD40 postcodes in the case of Glasgow's *Summer School* programme. The eligibility criteria for the programmes offered by Robert Gordon and St Andrews include attending a low progression school or another, individual-level marker of contextual disadvantage such as experience of being in care, being eligible for free school meals, being in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance, being a carer, being in the first generation of the family to go to university, or having experienced significant educational disruption. Notably, some of these individual-level contextual indicators do not also features as contextual indicators for the general applicant. This is surprising given that some, such as being eligible for free school meals or being in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance, are clear markers of contextual disadvantage which can be officially verified (see Report 3 for a detailed discussion).

2.5 The use of contextual indicators singly and in combination

Many institutions indicate that they will regard an applicant as contextually disadvantaged provided that any one of the specified contextual indicators is applicable. For some institutions, the adequacy of at least one indicator from the range presented is implied but in other cases it is made explicit, for example:

"We use three pieces of contextual data. If you're in any one of these three categories, we'll consider you for a contextual offer. These offers are usually lower than our standard offers." (Strathclyde)

A number of institutions make it explicit that certain indicators are not only considered adequate by themselves but are also a particular priority for the institution. These indicators include having been in care (Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Robert Gordon, Stirling), being a registered carer for others (Dundee, Glasgow Caledonian), being from an SIMD20/40 postcode (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon), having attended a SHEP or other partner school (e.g. Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, Robert Gordon), and being a recognised refugee or asylum seeker (Dundee). For example:

“We are also especially keen to help those who have been in registered Care, who are registered Carers and those who have Government recognised refugee or asylum status.” (Dundee)

3. How contextual indicators are used to inform admission decisions

This section documents how indicators of contextual disadvantage are or may be used to inform admissions decisions at each institution. We identify the points in the decision-making process at which contextual indicators are invoked, and identify whether contextualised offers involve standard or adjusted entry requirements. Where contextualised offers entail adjusted entry requirements, we record the terminology used to describe these offers, and we provide an indication of the number of grades difference between the adjusted entry requirements and the standard where such information is readily publically available. Our findings are summarised in Table 2.

Among the 15 institutions which referred to specific indicators of contextual disadvantage in relation to admissions (see Table 1, above), most but not all made it clear that those indicators *would be taken into account* when reaching admissions decisions (Dundee, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Heriot-Watt, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, Scotland’s Rural College, St Andrews, Stirling, Strathclyde, and West of Scotland). These institutions stated clearly, for example:

“...in addition to considering an applicant’s academic achievement, the University *will* [emphasis added] consider contextual data when making admissions decisions.” (Edinburgh Napier)

Table 2. How contextual indicators are used to inform admission decisions

HEI name	Points in the decision-making process at which contextual indicators are used					Term used to describe entry requirements set below the standard/typical				Grade difference between adjusted and the standard/typical offer		
	Invitation to interview or audition	Additional consideration for an offer	Guaranteed offer	Offer will be the standard/typical offer	Offer may/will be an adjusted offer	Contextualised offer	Minimum entry requirements	Adjusted offer	Supported offer	Unclear	One grade lower	Two or more grades lower
Aberdeen		✓			✓		✓					✓
Abertay		✓			✓		✓					✓
Dundee	✓	✓			✓				✓	✓		
Edinburgh		✓	Context+	Context	Context+		✓					✓
Edinburgh Napier	✓	✓										
Glasgow		✓			✓			✓				✓
Glasgow Caledonian		✓			✓	✓					✓	
Glasgow School of Art		✓										
Heriot-Watt		✓			✓	✓						✓
Highlands and Islands	No details provided											
Queen Margaret	✓	✓	✓	✓								
Robert Gordon	No details provided											
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	No details provided											
Scotland's Rural College		✓										
St Andrews		✓			✓		✓			✓		Gateway
Stirling	No details provided											
Strathclyde		✓			✓	✓						✓
West of Scotland	No details provided											

Of the fifteen institutions which mention using specific indicators of contextual disadvantage for admissions purposes, two institutions provide no further details about how contextual data impacts on the admissions decision-making process (Stirling and West of Scotland). Three institutions mention the use of contextual data to inform the shortlisting of applicants for interview or audition (Dundee, Edinburgh Napier, Queen Margaret), and thirteen institutions state that contextually indicated applicants will receive additional consideration for an offer, although only nine institutions indicate that contextually disadvantaged applicants will be considered for an adjusted offer. Some institutions also indicated that contextual data would be used to decide at confirmation which applicants to admit from among those who had narrowly missed the conditions of their offer.

Across the nine institutions that make adjusted offers to contextual disadvantaged applicants, four different terms are used to denote an adjusted offer: 'contextualised offer' (Glasgow Caledonian, Heriot-Watt and Strathclyde), 'minimum entry requirements' (Aberdeen, Abertay, Edinburgh and St Andrews), 'adjusted offer' (Glasgow), and 'supported offer' (Dundee). There is no obvious preferred term and in each case the term used speaks to the subtleties of how entry requirements are conceptualised. For example, Dundee's offer to contextually disadvantaged applicants is 'supported', and Glasgow's offer is 'adjusted', in that they are conditional on successful completion of an extended outreach programme; while Edinburgh and St Andrews offer places to certain categories of contextually disadvantaged applicants with reference to specified 'minimum entry requirements'. However, the use of a wide range of different terms may create confusion for prospective applicants exploring different institutional options.

Where adjusted offers are made, in two cases (Dundee and St Andrews) it is unclear exactly what the difference is between an adjusted and a standard offer. Dundee specifies minimum and typical entry requirements but it is unclear whether its 'supported offers' are offers at the minimum (though it might reasonably be assumed that they are). St Andrews specifies minimum but not standard/typical entry requirements, and while it is made reasonably clear that all applicants must meet the minimum entry requirements the extent of this grade discount is not immediately obvious to the general applicant (although significantly adjusted entry requirements are indicated for applicants to a small number of supported first year Gateway programmes).

One institution specifies that adjusted offers will be one grade lower than its standard offer (Glasgow Caledonian). Six institutions indicate that adjusted offers for the general applicant can be typically expected to be two grades lower than the standard (Aberdeen, Abertay,

Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt Strathclyde). Where successful completion of an intensive, assessed widening participation programme was mentioned as a contextual indicator for admissions purposes, this typically constituted an eligibility criterion for an adjusted offer, or a condition for a more substantially adjusted offer than available to contextually disadvantaged applicants in general. For example, successful completion of the Top Up or Summer School programme at Glasgow University is associated with adjusted entry requirements of AABBB in S5 or S6 for entry to the university's Social Science programmes instead of the standard offer of AAAAB in S5 or AAAAAA in S6.

4. Summary of key findings and recommendations

There is evidently a considerable degree of diversity at present in the ways in which Scottish higher education institutions approach contextualised admissions. A variety of different indicators of contextual disadvantage are being used in a range of different ways, and these are described using different terminologies. Some of this diversity is due to the fact that different institutions are presently at different stages in the process of developing appropriate and effective contextualised admissions strategies. The diversity of approaches is also due to the fact that sector-wide discussion about core principles are ongoing. However, looking across the range of current practices, a number of recommendations for good practice emerge.

4.1 The provision of clear guidance to applicants about whether or not they will be considered contextually disadvantaged for admissions purposes

From the perspective of prospective applicants, some institutions are clearer than others about which indicators of contextual disadvantage are considered sufficient, alone or in combination, to flag an applicant as contextually disadvantaged for the purposes of admission decision-making. Ideally, institutions would provide prospective applicants with the information needed to determine for themselves whether or not the institution would consider them contextually disadvantaged for admissions purposes. A number of universities are leading the way in this regard by providing detailed information about the indicators they use, with some providing look-up tools on their websites to enable prospective applicants to determine for themselves, for example, whether or not they attend a partner school or live in an SIMD20/40 area. Providing more detailed information to prospective students in a user-friendly way is likely to encourage engagement with the institution.

4.2 The provision of clear guidance to applicants about what they can expect if they are identified as contextually disadvantaged for admissions purposes

Some institutions are clearer than others about what actions they will take if an applicant is identified as contextually disadvantaged. All institutions should state clearly at which points in the admission decision-making process contextual indicators are taken into account, whether contextually disadvantaged applicants can expect to be prioritised for an offer, and exactly what entry requirements and other terms will apply to any offer they receive. As with the provision of information about which indicators institutions consider sufficient to recognise applicants as contextually disadvantaged, providing information about how this recognition will be acted upon is likely to encourage applications from prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially if the specified actions are likely to materially affect such applicants' chances of admission.

4.3 Greater and more ambitious use of adjusted offers

Many, but by no means all, Scottish higher education institutions make use of adjusted offers for contextually disadvantaged applicants. Those that do typically adjust offers by up to two grades relative to the standard offer for the general applicant, with larger adjustments for those who have successfully completed intensive widening access programmes. Notably, institutions which do adjust grade requirements are among the most academically selective within the sector, perhaps because such institutions, by definition, have more scope to reduce entry requirements. However, it is not clear from institutionally authored policy documents why less academically selective institutions are less inclined to adjust entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants, nor why more academically selective institutions do not adjust entry requirements to a greater degree. Employing more ambitious adjusted offers for contextually disadvantaged applicants – and advertising the fact – would likely increase applications from such students, and would likely increase post-confirmation conversion rates for contextually disadvantaged applicants. Report 4 examines in more detail the options open to institutions with regard to the more ambitious setting of adjusted entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants.

4.4 The sector-wide use of a common nomenclature around contextualised admissions

Institutions differ in how they describe the indicators they use, and in the terms they use to describe how applicants flagged as contextually disadvantaged will be treated during the admissions process. As stated earlier, there is no obviously correct terminology. However, the sector may wish to agree a common nomenclature to avoid confusing or deterring contextually disadvantaged applicants and their advisors with potentially unclear, bespoke terms.

4.5 The selection of appropriate and robust indicators of contextual disadvantage

This report has documented which indicators of contextual disadvantage are being used to inform admissions decisions in Scottish universities without consideration of the appropriateness, robustness or completeness of the various indicators used. At present, the evidence base in this regard is relatively undeveloped, and so institutions cannot necessarily be expected to have chosen the 'best' indicators, or to have gone very far towards evidencing the validity and reliability of the indicators being used. However, it is of critical importance that the indicators of contextual disadvantage used are valid and reliable and that all suitable indicators are considered for use. To assist institutional thinking in this regard, Report 3 sets out a conceptual analysis of the validity and reliability of a range of potential indicators of contextual disadvantage, including several that are not currently in widespread use by Scottish higher education institutions.